

Filipino nurses at Baylor University Medical Center: personal recollections

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A nationwide shortage of nurses in the early 1970s led Baylor University Medical Center (BUMC) to seek innovative ways to recruit and retain the numbers of qualified and committed nurses required. Baylor was a leader in developing and implementing the two-days alternative, or Baylor plan. Preceptorships and externships were developed. A day care center was established to make it easier for nurses and other employees to work

full time. The continuing shortage of nurses also induced Baylor to recruit nurses from abroad.

In the early 1970s, Robert Hille, vice president of BUMC, Julia Ball, director of nursing in Truett, Jonsson, and Hoblitzelle hospitals, and Dr. Andrew Small III, representing the medical staff, made recruiting visits to the Philippines. Phyllis Walk led a group to recruit in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Others visited Canada, Australia, and New Zealand for the same purpose. Among the recruiting efforts, those carried out in the Philippines have proven the most effective.

The Philippines was a natural recruitment choice because of its respected nursing programs and its citizens' ability to work in English. At BUMC's annual employee awards ceremony in 2000, Filipino nurses received awards for 20, 15, 10, and 5 years of service. Trustees, top executives, and physicians commended the nurses for their professional service and personal dedication.

Boone Powell, Jr., said administrators looked at the nurses' potential, availability, and capacity. "The Philippines had a good group of quality nurses who had interest in coming to the USA," Mr. Powell said. Filipino nurses came to the USA for political and economic reasons, a yearning for adventure, a taste for independence, and a desire to help their families financially.

Located in Southeast Asia, the Philippines is bounded by the Philippine and South China Seas. The nation enjoyed rapid economic growth and a democratic government after its independence from the USA in 1946, but when Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972, political and economic turmoil ensued. Filipinos began leaving their homeland, and for some, the USA was the light at the end of the tunnel. The names of and brief information about 28 Filipino nurses who came to BUMC—typical of the much greater number of Filipino nurses who served at BUMC over 3 decades—are pro-

vided in the *Table*. The *Figure* was taken at the Filipino Nurses Reunion in 1995.

Jocelyn Alvarez Allgood, a clinical nurse III in labor and delivery who came to BUMC in 1982, recalled:

The Philippines was under the oppressive yoke of martial law when I graduated from the University of Santo Tomas in 1978. My family had known that the nation would not recover economically or politically as long as President Marcos was in power. Ordinary Filipinos, no matter how hard they tried, would not have a chance to make a decent living. Fear for my future prompted my mother to send me to nursing school. The land of opportunity was recruiting nurses, and my mother provided the ticket.

Mila Zapanta La Tour, a clinical manager at 7 and 15 Roberts, said that coming to the USA not only provided an opportunity to see the world but also gave her personal, professional, and financial growth. "All my coworkers and friends in the Philippines were leaving for America, so I decided to do it, too. I was ready to live my life on my own," she said.

Typical of many of the Filipino nurses, Madelyn Panagsagan Villanueva came to BUMC to help on the home front. "In my family, I was the second oldest of 5 siblings," she said. "I left the Philippines for better job opportunities to help my family send my younger sisters to better high schools and colleges."

To most of the Filipino nurses, America was more than just a country; it had assumed a larger-than-life, dreamlike status. Elsie Basadre Tio, an administrative supervisor, provided her perspective:

When I was growing up, we lived on the faraway island of Visaya. The beach was our backyard, and we were surrounded by rugged terrain and mountains. I had an aunt who had 3 daughters working in the USA as nurses. When she would come to visit us, she would always bring us beautiful things from America. Avon was a big deal to us then. As a young girl, I would go to the beach, watch the sunset, and dream of America. I would tell myself, "Maybe America is on the other side of the mountain. Maybe America is where the sunset is." So I dreamt of becoming a nurse like my cousins so I could

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Table. A sampling of Filipino nurses at Baylor University Medical Center in 2000

| Year came | Name | Hometown | Nursing school | Position |
|--------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|---|
| 1972 | Mila Zapanta La Tour | Zamboanga City | Zamboanga General Hospital School of Nursing; Philippine Women's University, Manila; University of Texas at Arlington | Clinical manager, 7 and 15 Roberts |
| 1972 | Nemi Cabbuag Limket | Rizal, Cagayan | University of Santo Tomas, Manila | Intake home care coordinator, clinical quality care coordinator |
| 1975 | Greta Boac Pardue | Baguio City | University of Santo Tomas, Manila | Clinical manager, 8 Roberts; Special projects |
| 1975 | Erlinda Regla Villanueva | Romblon | Manila Central University | Clinical nurse III, 12 Roberts |
| 1976 | Ophelia Bogador Addison | Iloilo City | San Pedro Hospital College of Nursing | Clinical nurse III, operating room |
| 1978 | Amparo Capasgordo Luna | Iloilo City | St. Anthony School of Nursing | Clinical nurse III, 7 Roberts |
| 1980 | Evelyn Damaso Atis | Cebu City | Velez College of Nursing, Cebu City | Clinical nurse III, maternal and child health |
| 1980 | Lily Bogan | Cavite City | St. Luke School of Nursing, Quezon City | Clinical nurse III, 2 West-Truett |
| 1980 | Nita Garcia de Guzman | Isabela, Cagayan | Sta. Teresita School of Nursing, Quezon City | Clinical nurse III, maternal and child health |
| 1980 | Nora Rojo Laquian | Bugao, Bagamanoc, Catanduanes | Far Eastern University, Manila | Clinical nurse III, 12 Roberts |
| 1980 | Wilma dela Paz Lonzame | Sucat, Muntinlupa | Philippine Women's University, Manila; Texas Woman's University | Nurse educator |
| 1980 | Elsia Basadre Tio | Banate, Iloilo | St. Paul College of Nursing, Iloilo City | Part-time house supervisor |
| 1980 | Aurora Villalas Teves | Sindangan, Zamboanga Del Norte | Arellano University, Manila | Supervisor, 13 Roberts |
| 1981 | Remy del Mundo Bacani | Manila | University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City | Clinical nurse III, postanesthesia care unit |
| 1982 | Jocelyn Alvarez Allgood | San Pablo City, Laguna | University of Santo Tomas, Manila | Clinical nurse III, labor and delivery |
| 1982 | Elsa Lovete Carvajal | Butuan City | Butuan Doctors College of Nursing, Butuan City | Supervisor, 5 Jonsson |
| 1982 | Emma Gerio | Manila | University of Santo Tomas, Manila | Clinical manager, 3, 4, and 5 Jonsson |
| 1982 | Carla Torres Javier | Zamboanga City | Ateneo de Zamboanga College of Nursing, Zamboanga City | Clinical nurse III, 16 Roberts |
| 1982 | Susie Yanson Jennings | La Carlota City, Negros Occidental | Central Philippine University, Iloilo City | Supervisor, postanesthesia care unit |
| 1982 | Madelyn Panagsagan Villanueva | Kalibu, Aklan | Riverside Medical Center School of Nursing, Bacolod City | Clinical nurse III, maternal and child health |
| 1984 | Charito Rema Briones Nash | Bacolod City | Riverside Medical Center School of Nursing Bacolod City | Staff nurse, 15 Roberts |
| 1988 | Marilyn Mendez Arban | Siniloan, Laguna | Far Eastern University, Manila | Staff nurse, 12 Roberts |
| 1990 | Flordelis Estanislao Ponder | Pastrana, Leyte | Divine Word University, Tacloban City, Leyte | Staff nurse, bone marrow transplant unit |
| 1992 | Tessie Gales Gue | Igbaras, Iloilo | St. Paul College, Iloilo City | Supervisor, 13 Roberts |
| 1993 | Glen Babia Gaytano | Lucena City, Quezon Province | Sacred Heart College | Clinical nurse II, 2 ICU |
| 1994 | Dinah Senon Sanchez | Luy-a, Medellin, Cebu City | Cebu City College of Nursing | Staff nurse, 2 ICU |
| 1995 | Ferdinand B. Florendo | Cebu City | St. Luke's College of Nursing, Manila | Staff nurse, 16 Roberts |
| 1997 | Janet Reyes Boiser | Tagbilaran City, Bohol | Divine Word College, Tagbilaran City | Staff nurse, labor and delivery |

go to America. I was intrigued with America. Is America at the end of the rainbow? Is there a pot of gold there?

Nita Garcia de Guzman was more to the point. "I wanted to see the most powerful and best country in the whole world."

Filipino nurses came with hopes and desires to be the best in a country that would not settle for less. They came to BUMC believing it was the best place to achieve professional and personal growth. The fact that so many have remained throughout their careers is evidence that their beliefs were well founded.

Ophelia Bogador Addison, an operating room nurse who has worked at BUMC since 1976, said, "I stayed at Baylor because I was allowed to grow professionally. I work with a lot of people whom I look up to and who serve as role models."

Baylor ties often became family ties. Janet Reyes Boiser of labor and delivery said, "Baylor is full of friendly people who make you feel comfortable and welcome. It's a neat place with advanced technology and equipment. We have flexible hours and every weekend off. The nurse-to-patient staffing ratio is fair. Baylor provides continuing education for our professional growth, and they take care of patients and nurses as well." Tessie Gue, a supervisor at 13 Roberts, added: "Baylor gave me a chance to grow and make a lot of friends. Baylor also has flexible scheduling, especially the two-days alternative in which nurses work only on weekends."

Nurse educator Wilma dela Paz Lonzame said, "Baylor is like a second home. I have made so many friends here. They are my extended family." Equally as important, she said, is that Baylor is a progressive institution well known for its clinical expertise. In the same vein, she has advanced her clinical knowledge and skills. "By 1986, I had achieved my master's of science in nursing at Texas Woman's University. I also received Baylor's Nursing Excellence Award and Dallas-Fort Worth's Great 100 Nurses Award in 1984."

Ms. Allgood, a freelance writer as well as a nurse, expressed even more fully her views for choosing to work at Baylor.

Fresh from the university in 1978, I wanted to build my understanding of the field. One day, while looking through the *Manila Bulletin*, I read and reread a fascinating story about an extraordinary hospital: Baylor University Medical Center. Baylor was where Senator Ninoy Aquino—President Marcos' nemesis—would have his heart surgery. The way the newspaper described Baylor and Dallas ignited a passion in me that carried me halfway around the world and through the early days in America. To me, Baylor was and continues to be where great people come and where great nurses are trained.

When the Filipinos joined Baylor, the families left behind were often profoundly affected. Aurora Villalas Teves, also a supervisor at 13 Roberts, recalled, "We all suffered from my separation because of loneliness and difficulty adjusting to new ways



Figure. Nurses who came to Baylor in 1980 gathered for a 15-year reunion. Photo: Jerry Lanier.

of life." Madelyn Panagsagan Villanueva stated, "It was initially overwhelming for all. I was only 22 years old then, but we were all hopeful because I would be able to help my family financially." For Luz Zamora, an administrative supervisor at Baylor Waxahachie, leaving her husband and 3 little children was hard to bear when she boarded a plane for the first time on that fateful day in 1980. "I cried the whole time, as if my heart was being pulled from my chest," she said. "I still cry whenever I remember the scene. My husband thought he had lost me forever, but he knew I was a strong woman and that I would achieve my goal."

Mr. Powell said the level of sacrifice made by the nurses was "pretty remarkable. With all the difficulty, it was a wonderful thing to do to support their families."

The nurses considered the personal and family sacrifices well worth making. Susie Yanson Jennings, a supervisor in the post-anesthesia care unit, said, "My move to the USA affected my family in a positive way. I was able to help my baby sister go to medical school. She is now a pediatrician in the Philippines." Similarly, Greta Boac Pardue, a clinical manager, said, "I was able to send 2 family members to college. The move changed our lives for the better." Likewise, Flordelis Estanislao Ponder was able to help one of her brothers attend medical school. Dinah Senon Sanchez sent not only her brothers and sisters to college but her nieces and nephews as well.

Lily Bogan said coming to Baylor was an escape from an unhappy marriage back home and an opportunity to give her daughter a brighter future and a more stable family life. Not long after her arrival, she met an American, Gary Bogan, and eventually married him. "Gary treated my daughter like she was his own," Ms. Bogan said. "My daughter would not have had an opportunity to succeed if we stayed in the Philippines. Now she is a psychiatric resident at Stanford University Hospital in California."

The move to Baylor greatly affected the nurses' personal and professional lives. Perhaps typical of the nurses, Remy Bacani said, "Being away from my family, I learned to be independent. I grew up fast. I learned to trust God more, and in doing so, to trust in myself. I found that nursing is the same whether in the Philippines or in the USA—patients need tender loving care. The

only difference is that here our job is easier with the abundance of equipment to help us work faster and more efficiently.”

When the nurses arrived at BUMC, they found they would have to make numerous changes. Even though all the nurses had been educated in English, they found significant differences in Texas pronunciations. Mae Centeno of the critical care unit said, “I was putting the accent on the wrong syllable so the word did not sound right. I had to take conversational English classes to improve my manner of speaking.” Ms. Allgood remembered that, at first,

learning to understand the way Americans speak was a challenge. I found myself asking patients, doctors, and ancillary people to repeat themselves. Talking on the telephone seemed like a nightmare. Nobody could understand the way I talked, and I could not understand them. Other challenges I faced included working with modern equipment as well as disposable items. Wow! The staff just threw away sponges and needles; they never resterilized them. It took a while to get in the habit of throwing things away. Working with Americans proved an even greater challenge. I had to prove to everyone that I was just as good as the American nurses. I worked hard for the patients, doctors, and coworkers to trust me, and eventually they did.

The nurses also had to adjust to differences in climate, weather, food, and housing. For sisters Evelyn and Arlene Damaso, the first few months were tough. “The language barrier, our accent, the weather, and the food proved to be the most daunting aspects I faced,” Evelyn said. “I wanted to eat more rice, but we didn’t know where to find some. I didn’t realize that it could get cold in Texas, and we would be wearing our summer clothes even in cold weather. I would wear only a sweater in wintertime. We shivered at the bus stop while waiting for the bus to take us to work on the night shift.” Ms. Pardue recalled that when she first started working at BUMC, the Filipinos thought Dr. Pepper was a physician. “When a patient requested Dr. Pepper, one of the Filipino nurses had Dr. Pepper paged all over the hospital.”

BUMC’s reception of Filipino nurses was favorable initially and has remained favorable since their arrival. Peggy Kuehler, clinical manager of 12 Roberts who has been at BUMC since 1974, recalled that in 1980 when she heard that Baylor administrators were returning to Manila to recruit nurses, she said,

Thank God. I was taking care of 42 patients alone at night with only 2 unit aides to help me. I had no reservations. I was thankful that we were getting help at last. I oriented 4 nurses at the same time on the night shift. They fit right in. They were very open, organized, and willing to work. When they saw something new they would ask me, “What’s this?” They’re friendly people. They’re always smiling and they are always worried about getting their work done. They know their business. They work as a team. . . . They offer fresh thoughts because they have experience and perspective from another side of the world. My friendship with them has lasted over the years. We know we are stuck with each other.

Physician reactions, too, have been almost universally favorable. Dr. Robert Parks, a BUMC anesthesiologist, reflected this in saying, “I trusted the Filipino nurses immediately. In the beginning they were too dazzled. They did not speak out as they should have, but that changed as they gained confidence. I think we need more Filipino nurses.”

It all seems so long ago when the first 6 Filipino nurses came to Baylor, young and timid but determined to give their all. “I came with \$50 in my pocket, a suitcase in my hand, a degree under my belt, and lots of brain power,” Ms. La Tour said. Nemi Cabbuag Limket recalled her first few months at Baylor as one of the original recruits in 1972. “What struck me most when I was working at the orthopaedic unit was that patients were mostly elderly people. Patients would ask me if I were really a registered nurse. They would say, ‘You look like a student. You couldn’t be a registered nurse. You’re too young.’ I would just smile at their comments.” These first 6 blazed the trails for the next generations and showed their devotion.

Dahl Isidro Henderson said, “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. There is no attraction for me outside of Baylor. Some nurses have left, but eventually they came back because they saw that it really wasn’t a greener pasture outside of Baylor.” Ms. Lonzame left for a short time and came back for the simple reason that “Baylor has very strong values and a strong work ethic that stand out when you compare it with other hospitals. What Baylor stands for in terms of values and work ethic are the things that I personally stand for. There is a strong relationship among the people at Baylor. You walk around and you see people who are helpful and you see administrators who know you by name. You see administrators visiting you at Christmas Eve to wish you a Merry Christmas.”

As the medical center has progressed, so have the Filipino nurses. Remy Tolentino, the highest-ranking nurse of Filipino ancestry at BUMC, is the chief nursing officer. She represents the nursing department at meetings of the BUMC board of trustees and oversees the strategic planning for nursing management, among other things. Born, reared, and educated in the USA, Ms. Tolentino started as a thoracic intensive care unit nurse in 1981. The climb up the ladder of success was not easy, but she saw obstacles not as barriers, but as challenges. She worked with a group of Filipino nurses when she first started at Baylor and was impressed with their work. “The Filipino nurses were very friendly, very outgoing, highly competent, and very much team players,” Ms. Tolentino said. “They have contributed a lot in nursing excellence, commitment, and loyalty. They are an excellent group of hard-working people.”

Nursing Administrator Linda Plank echoed these sentiments. She recalled the staff’s reaction in 1980 when told more Filipino nurses were coming. “We were tickled to hear the news. Their arrival was our very first time for cultural awareness. Every recollection I have is positive. They hit the road running.”

Toward the end of the 20th century, there was again a growing shortage of nurses in Dallas and at BUMC. In late 2000, therefore, BUMC representatives again began recruiting nurses in the Republic of the Philippines. Joel Allison said that recruiting must go international to meet the needs of Baylor patients. “The Filipino nurses with their programs and educational background and their ability to communicate effectively provide the quality care needed to achieve Baylor’s high standards.” It is likely that recruitment will be successful on a continuing basis. Institutions in Baylor Health Care System will continue to rely on Filipino nurses to provide highly professional care and, in turn, provide those nurses with the career opportunities they seek.